

# The Abbé Dubois in the Baramahal Records.

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## The Abbé Dubois in the Baramahal Records.

The Abbé Dubois (Jean A. Dubois 1765—1848) was ordained a priest in France at 27; but escaping from the horrors of the French Revolution and joining mission work under the Missions Etrangères, was first attached to the Pondicherry Mission. After the fall of Seringapatam in 1799 the Abbé was invited by the Catholic congregation to visit the place, in order to reconvert the forced perverts to Islam who were there. He resolved that in the course of his missionary work he should follow the illustrious example, set by De Nobili and Beschi, of adopting the Hindu mode of dress and of accommodating himself to the customs and even the prejudices of the people of the land. He says: "During the long period that I remained among the natives, I made it my constant rule to live as they did, conforming exactly in all things to their manners, to their style of living and clothing and even to most of their prejudices. In this way I became quite familiar with the various tribes that compose the Indian Nation and acquired the confidence of those whose aid was most necessary for the purpose of my work."<sup>1</sup> The Abbé stayed 31 years in India, living entirely among the people chiefly in the Mysore country (where he lived for 22 years and) where he founded the Church at Mysore and the agricultural community (of reconverted Christians) at Sathalli near Hassan. The Abbé is also said to have introduced vaccination into Mysore as hinted at in the proceedings of the Madras Government in June 1809, containing the extract of a letter from the Dewan of Mysore, dated the 10th of May.<sup>2</sup>

The Abbé's book on the character and manners of the people was stated at the time by Major Wilks, acting Resident in Mysore and a noted scholar-historian, in the course of a letter addressed to the Military Secretary of the Madras Governor, as containing "the most correct, comprehensive and minute account extant in any European language of the customs and manners of the Hindus." The manuscript of the work was communicated to Lord William Bentinck shortly before his departure from the Governorship of Madras; and at a later date the Governor-in-Council decided to purchase it on account of the Company for the sum of 2,000 pagodas.<sup>3</sup> Both the learned Sir James Mackintosh, the founder of the Literary Society of Bombay, to whom the manuscript was submitted and Mr. William Erskine, the translator of Babar's Autobiography, fully endorsed Wilks' opinion of the book; while Lord William Bentinck said that "in a political point of view the information which the work of the Abbé Dubois has to impart might be of the greatest

<sup>1</sup> *Description of the Character, Manners and the Customs of the People of India and their Institutions, Religious and Civil.* Original Edition, 1817. Preface, p. XV.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in foot-note on pp. 483-84 in B. E. Rice's *Mysore, A Gazetteer*, Vol. I.

<sup>3</sup> *Vide Despatch to the Directors from the Governor-in-Council of 24th December 1807* which contains an account of the Abbé and his work.

benefit in aiding the servants of the Government in conducting themselves more in unison with the customs and prejudices of the natives."

The work was translated in London in 1816 and published under the auspices of the Directors in the next year. Meanwhile in 1815 the Abbé had revised and amplified his work; but this was not published till 1897. He returned to France in June 1823 with a pension from the Company and then published his famous Letters on the State of Christianity in India which boldly announced his conviction that the conversion of the Hindus, particularly of the upper classes, was quite an impossible task. He became a Director and subsequently the Superior of the Mission Etrangères in Paris and died, universally respected, in February 1848.

The work of the Abbé is full of valuable information, valuable even at the present day. It discusses the origin and the antiquity of the caste system, the division and sub-division of castes, the advantages resulting therefrom, the four *ashramas* in the life of the Brahman, the condition of the *Pariahs*, of the literature and the customs of the various classes of Brahmans, the system of civil and criminal justice prevailing, etc.

It may not be out of place here to indicate the correspondence that passed in 1797 between the Abbé and Lieutenant-Colonel A. Read, Commanding Civil and Military in the Baramahal and Salem Countries. In a letter dated Dharmapuri 13th September 1797,<sup>4</sup> the Abbé complains of his persecution by black priests from Malabar (evidently Syrian Christians) who attempted to oust him from the Churches in Baramahal and Salem and saying that the spiritual authority given to him was by the Bishop of Dolicha, Vicar Apostolic at Pondicherry who was entrusted by the Pope with the spiritual care of all Christians living in Tipu's country (portions of the Baramahal region were then under Tipu) and also claiming that the English Government had not only acknowledged the validity of his ministry, but also rendered active assistance, pecuniary and otherwise, to him. In a subsequent letter, dated the 26th September<sup>5</sup> he reiterated his petition to Colonel Read. The latter replied from Tirupattur under date 29th September 1797, that all religions and sects were tolerated by the British Government. Read wrote thus: "There appears no reason for my acting differently in respect to whatever sects of Christians may appear in these districts. I wish therefore that you would compound with the black priests that you mention as having arrived from the Malabar Coast in such manner that you may not interrupt one another in the exercise of your religious functions."

The letter continued :

" You state that they have authority from the Government of Madras to exercise theirs and that your claim to the exercise of the spiritual jurisdictions of these districts is superior to theirs as derived from the Pope. If their

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<sup>4</sup> The Baramahal Records—Section V, Property, p. 77.  
<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 80, No. LXXXII in the Original Records.

pretentions be such as you mention, it cannot be questioned; at the same time it is extremely improbable that the power of the Pope to delegate any authority whatever over these districts was ever acknowledged by any of the Native Princes. I am sure it would not be admitted by the Government of Madras.

“ It is to those principles and to the freedom of the British Government that you owe the civilities you acknowledge; and as an officer belonging to it, I consider all sects and descriptions of men in these districts equally entitled to my protection.”

To this the Abbé answered in a laboured communication<sup>6</sup> that he was well acquainted with the spirit of universal tolerance that characterised the British Nation; but that he claimed the protection of the Government “ in the absolute and exclusive possession of the Churches that I have caused to be erected in these districts.” He added “ I never carry nonsense to such a point as to solicit the expelling of my opponents from these districts. I only ask to be favoured with the same protection as before and to be maintained in possession of the Churches and lodgings I have erected . . . . ” To this Mr. Read replied that as the Abbé waived his spiritual right over Christians living in those districts and confined his claims to property that had been invaded by his opponents, it became an easy matter for him to decide”?

The Abbé’s interest was not merely confined to the propagation of his own religion. He addressed the authorities fairly frequently about the condition of the land and the people and about the possibilities of their improvement. In reply to a letter from Mr. Robert Hamilton, Assistant Collector, Central Division of the Baramahal Region, soliciting any hints from himself regarding the culture of the silk worm, the Abbé wrote (from Kovilur dated the 8th December 1796)<sup>8</sup> that the Baramahal appeared to be well calculated by its temperature to the cultivation of the silk-worm and gave an account of the method of the culture of mulberry trees followed in France, pointing out that the land beneath the great Tirupattur tank was most suited for it. He added that Tipu Sultan had intended to carry out the same object and judging the Baramahal country to be best suited for the undertaking had actually ordered the inhabitants in many places like Rayakottai and Virabhadradurg to cultivate mulberry trees; but in consequence of the war and the country becoming subject to the English, the inhabitants forsook that culture. The Abbé gave also hints as to the rearing of the silk-worm; he urged Government to procure breeds, both of the French and Piedmontese silk, which would give a greater quantity of superfine silk per given quantity of cocoons. The Board of Revenue in Bengal in their search for a good breed found none better than the Baramahal breed in the whole of the country. The Abbé urged the possibility of making silk-culture prosperous and a commercial object of immediate importance.

<sup>6</sup> Dated 8th October 1897, No. LXXXIV in the Original Records.

<sup>7</sup> Letter, dated 31st October 1897, No. LXXXV in the Original Records.

<sup>8</sup> The Baramahal Records, Sec. IV, Products, Letter No. XLIV.

The Abbé was also in correspondence with the Principal Collector regarding some schemes for the improvement of agriculture. In an exhaustive letter (dated Dharmapuri the 29th December 1797)<sup>9</sup> he now put forward a plan of increasing the public revenue, improving cultivation and alleviating the distress of the poor people, at the same time. He says he found in many places cultivable land left uncultivated though there were pools containing water enough for cultivating all the lands below for six months. He urged thus: "The inhabitants will earnestly retake and again cultivate the land which several motives obliged them to leave uncultivated if you (the Collector) will consent to yield it to them for half the produce, that is to say that a half of the harvest good or bad be for the tenant, and another for the Company; at this rate I would pledge myself that an inch of land should not be left uncultivated in the country at large. My opinion on this head is that of all the inhabitants I have been able to consult in the several districts." It is the very poor that abandon their lands at the very first bad harvest "whose failure only one year is sufficient to ruin them and expose them to be obliged to sell their cow and other beasts to pay their taxes" whatever be the reduction that the Collector might effect in such cases.

The Abbé urged that this method of assessment of new land to be brought under cultivation might be so arranged to operate as to prevent fully cultivated land being abandoned by means of the following precautions:—(1) Every man who would leave the culture of the land at the time of this regulation should be excluded from the advantage of having any share in the distribution of the uncultivated land. (2) Preference should be given to the principal tenants in each village in proportion to the land they are now cultivating and by giving them uncultivated land as a kind of indemnity. (3) No body should be admitted to this benefit, of those who left cultivation before this time unless they should engage to cultivate other land in proportion at the old rate of assessment. (4) The assessment of the Company's share of the harvest of these uncultivated lands now to be cultivated should be done by two or three trustworthy men in each locality and the Government's share might be easily converted into money at the current market price of grain.

We also hear that the returns of the inhabitants of the country as taken by the British officials under Read were more or less false, as many imagined that Government ordered that enumeration in order to impose a poll-tax and so concealed the number of persons composing their families. The Abbé tried to reveal the real motives of Government but was unable to disillusion the people entirely. He was fully convinced that the real population was at least a third above the nominal returns.

These are only a few instances of the great interest that the good Abbé took in the welfare of the people, both moral and material. Other instances of his practical humanity lie buried in the records of Government and are easily worth publication in a connected form.

<sup>9</sup> The Baramahal Records, Sec. XXI; Vols. I & II, Miscellany; No. XXXI.